## Statewide Professional Learning Community: Teacher and Student Voices What is making the difference for Utah students?

**FOCUS:** This electronic journal is a way to highlight the impact of the Utah Core Standards on teachers who are changing their instruction so that student learning and academic challenge are at the CENTER of all adult collaborative efforts. These collaborative efforts shape a Statewide Professional Learning Community is OPEN to all and includes the Utah State Office of Education, every school district and charter LEA, each school and classroom in ALL eight regions of Utah, from Bear Lake to Monument Valley. The PROFESSION of teaching is based on our capacity to learn with each other for the purpose of benefitting ALL Utah students, their families and communities.

**Volume 1:** In this inaugural volume we address two dominant ideas that have been expressed by educators throughout Utah:

- 1. I am going to teach TO the old standards because that is what is tested.
- 2. Only AP students can do the kind of rigorous work that is being expected in the new core standards.

Theme: Students Responding to Increased Rigor and Clear Expectations

### Excerpt from Public Statement to the Utah State School Board, April 2012:

In my capacity as a classroom teacher, implementing the new Utah Core Standards yielded dramatic increases in student achievement. I worked at a Title One school, Northwest Middle, with students who came into 7th grade largely below grade level in both reading and writing. My second year there I began to implement the new Utah Standards and the growth was astounding. Most of my students scored proficient, and nearly all of my students made gains. The school made AYP that year, and my students scored almost 10% higher than they had the year before.

In my capacity as a literacy coach I have seen another benefit of the new Utah Core: It promotes school wide collaboration across grades and disciplines...and that is no small feat. In fact, it is one of our greatest challenges in education. In my work at Glendale Middle, I supported the 8th grade team to develop an inquiry unit based on the new Utah Core. Their essential question was, "How has America defined and redefined freedom over time?" The students read the Declaration of Independence, Amendments

to the Constitution and other complex texts and then wrote an analysis paper on the history of Freedom in America.

In their presentation of the unit to other teachers in the district someone asked,
"How have your students exceeded your expectations?" One of the teachers of

"How have your students exceeded your expectations?" One of the teachers, with tears in her eyes, responded,

"In every way possible. We didn't know if they could do this, and we were worried. But they exceeded all of our expectations."

The new Utah Core is redefining freedom for our students. It is giving ALL students opportunities to succeed at high levels, and we at Glendale Middle School are glad that, finally, much is being expected of our students, too.

-Kenna Rodgers, Literacy Coach, NBCT, Glendale Middle School

#### Excerpt from Public Statement to the Utah State School Board, April 2012:

As a secondary English teacher of thirty years and as an academic coach assigned to Provo School District's two major high schools, I have personally seen and experienced this transformative effect on classroom instruction and on student learning.

Earlier this school year, for example, I shared with other English teachers some early draft samples of standards-based student performance tasks created by Utah teachers. These tasks included close analytical reading, speaking and listening, researching, and writing both academic narratives and argumentative essays. While some of the teachers were initially anxious about the level of rigor expected both from them and from their students, they ultimately collaborated then designed units of study that resulted in their students writing thoughtful arguments and extraordinary narratives.

Utah teachers and their students are up to the task of more rigorous, more relevant instruction and learning that the Utah Core demands. In fact, I have witnessed more teacher collaboration, more thoughtful classroom discussions, more explicit teaching of reading and writing strategies, more academic stamina. Moreover, I still experience Shakespeare, I still hear poetry, I still feel the love of classics in these classrooms.

- Debra Drummond, Instructional Coach in Content Literacy, Provo School District

## Excerpt from Written Application – USOE Approved National Facilitator, April 2012, Response to "Commitment to collaborative work and adjusting instruction:"

Attending the Saturday Seminars has provided me with several powerful learning opportunities. I accepted the challenge to write an assessment for my students that included selected responses (SR), constructed responses (CR), and performance tasks (PT). Realizing that this assessment would require them to not simply recall, but to analyze and synthesize, I knew that my teaching would need to provide them with classroom experiences to prepare them to be successful. Our classroom discussions were rich and diverse, and my students - as always - amazed me with their insights. Hillocks describes these conversations as "being in the flow." We were definitely in "the flow" in room #22! For the performance assessment, I chose the myth "Bacius and Philemon", as well as the true story of Craig Kielburger, "One Child's Labor of Love". It was exciting for me to see the students demonstrate a higher depth of knowledge in this assessment. Their task was not simply to choose the right answer, but to carefully consider all the possibilities and select all appropriate responses. Faced with this type of questions, some students asked, "Will you at least tell us how many right answers there are?" I didn't. Although they groaned, most of them enjoyed the challenge. I was very pleased with the results of the assessment, and received excellent feedback at the next Saturday Seminar. This experience had the most impact on my learning because it has had such a powerful impact on my teaching. I refer often to Hess' Cognitive Rigor Matrix as a guide to my teaching. I want my students to be able to gather, analyze and synthesize, not just recall and select.

 Marci Nelson, Sixth Grade Teacher, USOE national Facilitator, Box Elder School District

# Excerpt from Written Application – USOE Approved National Facilitator, April 2012, Response to "Commitment to collaborative work and adjusting instruction:"

Developing, using, receiving feedback and then revising performance assessments have had the most impact on my learning this year. After a summer spent helping teachers learn about the new Utah Core and explaining how we will need to adjust our instruction

to the new rigor of the Core allowed me time to reflect on how I would adapt and adjust my own instruction once the school year began. I started slowly by taking units that I had previously taught and examining how I could incorporate the new standards into lessons that I knew were both interesting and instructive for my students.

The first performance assessment I changed was the selected response questions my students completed for the first section of Fahrenheit 451. Instead of asking them ten Depth of Knowledge Level 1 questions that they generally answered without demonstrating much thinking, I changed the questions to Depth of Knowledge 3 and gave them four questions as a quiz. I knew they would not do well since I had not prepared them for the depth of rigor required to sufficiently answer the questions but allowing them to fail was also part of my instructional strategy—my honors students tend to learn more after they fail because they so rarely do poorly. This had made many of them "lazy learners" who don't demonstrate their true intellectual capacity, mainly because they rarely have to.

After most of my students failed the quiz, we then examined the questions and compared their answers to my answers and discussed what new skills and strategies the students would need in order to complete the next quiz successfully. Most students realized that they were not using text examples as evidence as they analyzed and answered the questions. The first quiz did not impact their grade and I called it a "learning experience." This also helped me as a teacher-learner begin to put into practice what we'd been discussing all summer—how do we help our students become career and college ready if they are never given the opportunity to demonstrate what they know or don't know?

I gave two more quizzes of similar length and depth of knowledge and found that my students gradually began to recognize their own reading comprehension strengths and weaknesses. Most importantly, they began to transfer the need of using the text as evidence into their writing as we moved into argumentation. I showed the final assessment to my partners at our Saturday Session and together we examined the questions and answers given by my students. I asked for specific feedback about what the teachers learned from my student assessments and the feedback was positive. My partners liked the fact that four well-written questions, with a grading rubric, gave students the chance to demonstrate what they'd learned without having to complete a long test. They also noticed how my students struggle to incorporate actual textual evidence in their answers. They tend to rely on very general statements about important details or they focus on one part of a question and ignore the rest.

While my students are still struggling to evaluate and analyze what they read, they are learning because I can see it in their more analytic and evaluative answers. Being able to share the work that both myself and my students are doing with colleagues helped tie in what we'd been helping teachers learn all summer and put it into actual practice. I truly believe that the new rigor will help all stakeholders: teachers, students, and parents understand what it means to be more critical readers and thinkers. The ability to examine, to analyze, and to reflect on what they didn't know allowed my students to see themselves as learners. Working with my students allowed me to do the same with the new Core and with my students. The learning continued once I met with colleagues at the Saturday session where I brought some student samples and discussed similar experiences with them.

 Kim S. Rathke, Middle School Teacher, USOE National Facilitator, Davis School District

### Email reflection in response to the question: How has your changed instruction supported your students? April 2012:

I have seen the students think at a much deeper level since introducing the Utah Core Standards, literacy in Technical Subjects. For example when reading a regular automotive maintenance manual, the students can now look much beyond what is just mentioned. We have major discussions that would not be possible unless deep level thinking had occurred. How the cost of fuel rising not just effects families but the entire industry from lowered sales of vehicles to less family vacations and higher transportation costs, etc.

The new Utah Core Standards have awakened our students to be better thinkers. This would never have happened otherwise! When I mention to adults the advantages that I've seen, comments are very positive. Some have said yes, I wished we had this in high school!

There is no doubt that students will benefit in life and at their future jobs with these skills gained from the Utah Core. It has made me a better teacher too.

- Arne Erisoty, CTE Automotive Teacher, Weber School District

### Email reflection in response to the question: How has your changed instruction supported your students? April 2012:

I have changed my teaching based on the new Utah Core Standards BECAUSE it has required me to do less force feeding to my students and memorizing of useless information that the students store up to pass a multiple choice test. It has shown ways that I can bring in more outside material to pair and connect with either the literature that we are learning or to create meaningful discussions. When we have these discussions in class the students are learning to articulate themselves in a way that shows that they are educated. I have been able to teach my students how to make claims, and then support them through evidence. This is so much more applicable to real world use in college as well as in the job market. It has been a joy for me as the teacher to no longer force feed but have my students take part in their own education. I have been able to teach them to question and search by using methods and strategies from the new Utah Core. They now have an ownership in their education.

I believe in this new core whole heartily and can see the difference in my classroom and my students already this year. Once I am able to fully implement these changes I am confident in the knowledge that my students will possess as they pursue their future goals. They will be marketable as well as confident in their knowledge since they are the ones who have done the discovering. My students are taking more ownership in their education and the new core helps to create a student who has a love of learning. There is not greater gift that I can give a student then to be a lifelong learner.

- Alicia Mitchell, English Teacher, Weber School District

### Excerpt from Public Statement on Facebook page for the Utah State School Board, April 2012:

The Utah Core draws from the best of state core curricula, and takes them to the next step. The Core endeavors to bring out teachers' and students' most thoughtful, intelligent, capable selves. The English/Language Arts Core leaves complete choice of texts to teachers, schools, and districts. Its emphasis on informational texts invites teachers from all the disciplines--not just English--to teach students how to read carefully and think critically about the mass quantities of information presented to them not only in school but throughout their daily lives. The Core encourages teaching of high

quality literary texts, and does not prescribe any particular texts to be taught. The Core helps bring clear focus to teachers about what their students should be learning. The standards include such fundamental elements as: reading and comprehending complex literary and informational texts; delineating and evaluating arguments in a text; determining central ideas or themes of a text; producing clear and coherent writing; writing arguments to support claims; and drawing evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, research, and reflection. The Core offers suggestions of age appropriate exemplary literary texts for examples of what teachers could teach, but does not prescribe them. The Core also offers exceptional examples of student writing for each grade level that can give teachers a vision of what is possible for their students, and what they can strive for.

- Janet Kaufman, Associate Professor, English, University of Utah

#### **Commentary and Connections: Student Engagement**

- Christelle Estrada, Secondary English Specialist, USOE

In June of 2011 over 8,000 Utah seniors did not walk across the stage: 21% of OUR possible graduates. The 2006 Gates Foundation report, *Silent Dilemma: Perspectives from High School Dropouts*, sheds light on why students drop out and NOT from the adults' perspectives.

What did the study show us that can influence each of us in our classrooms, whether at the university or the kindergarten? As the report makes clear "dropping out of high school is not a sudden act, but a gradual process of disengagement; attendance patterns are a clear early sign."

In looking back on their school experiences young people universally express regret and TELL US loud and clear what would have kept them in the system of schooling:

- 1. Improve teaching and curriculum to make school more relevant and engaging and enhance the connection between school and work (4 of 5 or 81%): Students wanted opportunities for real-world learning and said that they needed to see the connection between school and getting a good job.
- 2. Improve instruction and access to support for struggling students (4 of 5 or 81%): Students wanted smaller classes with individualized instruction; 70% believed more tutoring, summer school and extra time with teachers would have improved their chances of graduating.

- 3. Build a school climate that fosters academics (7 of 10 or 71%): Students wanted their schools to do more to make it interesting as well as a safe place (57%) with more classroom discipline and increased supervision (62%).
- 4. Ensure that students have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school: 65% said there was an adult who cared about their success and more than 3 of 5 or 62% said their school needed to do more to help students with problems outside of class.
- 5. Improve the communication between parents and schools (71%): Students felt that one key to keeping them in school was to have better communication with parents and increased parent involvement in their education.

For the detailed Gates report follow this link:

http://www.gatesfoundation.org/united-states/Documents/TheSilentEpidemic3-06FINAL.pdf

For the USOE 2011 Dropout Report follow this link:

http://www.schools.utah.gov/board/Reports/10072011PerceivedReasonsNotGraduating.aspx

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